

## Against the Grain

---

Volume 21 | Issue 4

Article 40

---

September 2009

# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Infrastructure

Bob Nardini

*Coutts Information Services*, [bnardini@couttsinfo.com](mailto:bnardini@couttsinfo.com)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Nardini, Bob (2009) "Issues in Vendor/Library Relations -- Infrastructure," *Against the Grain*: Vol. 21: Iss. 4, Article 40.  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.2471>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

# Issues in Vendor/Library Relations — Infrastructure

Column Editor: **Bob Nardini** (Group Director, Client Integration and Head Bibliographer, Coutts Information Services)  
<bnardini@couttsinfo.com>

“Infrastructure” is a word we hear a lot these days, and frequently attached to the adjective “crumbling.” Bridges that collapse into rivers, banks that go under, airports where travelers don’t get out, hospitals where patients don’t get in, highways clogged with vehicles that don’t move. These and other sites of public dysfunction give journalists, bloggers, and everybody else plenty of room to point out that the basic structures all of us depend upon to go about our business are showing some age.

Libraries, on the other hand, boast splendid networks of infrastructure. Have a question? In case you do, there’s a Reference Librarian waiting behind the Reference Desk. Need a book? There’s an OPAC that might help, if you know how to use it, and if you don’t mind coming in to get the book, and if you can navigate our stacks.

The infrastructure problem slyly alluded to here is not, of course, overuse. While some parts of library infrastructure bear loads that grow heavier, such as inter-library loan systems or public study or computing areas, other library systems suffer from underuse. OPAC searches are not burning up library servers. Nor is the Circulation Desk in constant pandemonium. And like the telephone booths that were once always nearby — on every street corner, in every lobby, in every store — Reference “service points” have been coming down in libraries. It’s hardly an unknown problem. What to Do About Reference? is a question raised in the library literature all the time.

On the other hand, What to do About the Approval Plan? is a backroom question raised faintly at best in today’s literature. For decades approval plans have been a big part of the collection development infrastructure at academic libraries, while for years usage of print books has been shrinking at many of them. Some approval plans may have been trimmed in size, but each week on schedule most continue to deliver considerable numbers of books, each one of which just might circulate.

With a little luck you can still make a pay phone call on the street, even though they’ve hauled away most of the pay phones. It’s just a lot harder to find a booth now. Phone booths could come down because people have other ways to make calls. But if they hauled away a library’s approval

plan because people aren’t calling for books like they did in the old days, what would you do then?

Libraries don’t have other good ways of acquiring large numbers of books. What about firm orders? you might ask. That would require more staff to create, tend, and receive the orders; as well as selection effort to identify books to place orders for in the first place. This was a reason why approval plans grew as they did. They freed staff to do other things; or rather, they freed library administrators to free staff to do other things. They made it possible to rework the infrastructure.

Now libraries have the opposite problem. All the inertia is with the approval plan. It takes a lot of infrastructure to support one, not to mention the resulting books. Accept the books at a loading dock. Move them around on book trucks. Receive them at work stations. Display them for a week or two on special shelves. Hire and train technicians. Student workers, too. Write up the weekly schedule. Bring on selectors in their role. Educate the teaching faculty when you have to. House the books in the stacks.

Next, let’s not forget the approval plan profile. “I hate this more than anything in life” might be an extreme way of putting it, but once a subject selector did say that to me as I helpfully set out to work with him on defining his section of the profile. Extreme, sure, but over the years I witnessed many a selector more silently suffer the same agonies this expressive colleague did. Writing a profile is work. Some people dislike it. Others invest themselves in this work, take pride in it, enjoy it even. For a library, the process brings staff together into a social experience that can at some moments be as solemn as a courtroom and at others seem more like a quilting bee.

Either way, the profile becomes part of a library’s collection development wiring. Do we just rip it out?

Then there’s a book budget to spend, a budget over the years nurtured lovingly enough that spending seven figures on new print books annually is not an unusual thing for the top tier of libraries, and high six figures not unusual in tiers below that. The staff isn’t in place to spend that kind of money in any way other than through an approval plan. If usage justifies the money, fine, but

if making that case becomes difficult, what does a library do?

A library could say, Well we’ll just buy the books we need, then. And that could either mean saying, Thanks but we don’t need nearly so much money for print books anymore, which isn’t especially likely. Or it could mean saying, From now on we’ll just respond to demand for books, instead of anticipating the demand. And that again would mean more firm orders — and where then to get the staff to perform, say, the extra pre-order searching? Pull them from the new digitization project or off the metadata team? Again, not likely.

Then, there’s workflow. Libraries have invested a lot over the past decade in retooling workflows from prior eras of book selection and acquisitions, meaning, principally, to retrain and reallocate staff. Oh no, time so soon to do that all over again?

Maybe not. Over the decades the approval plan idea has been nothing if not flexible.

At first, libraries had more money for books than they were able to spend by placing orders for everything. Approval plans took care of that. Then money got tighter while academic and scientific book publishing exploded and the approval plan became the way for libraries to define the “core” of books they really needed. Then staffing got tighter and the easiest way to spend the budget, once more, was to grow the approval plan beyond the core. Meanwhile, book selecting became the lowest duty of selectors, who were all busier on other fronts and sometimes the approval plan kind of ran itself. At the same time, serials and then electronic resources began to eat up the book budget. A key component of book selection became coming up with the best way to cut the profile, often on the part of selectors who weren’t too familiar with actual book selecting, and at a time when some people weren’t so sure anymore that there really was a core, and others were starting to ask why the library still needed all those books in the first place.

That’s pretty much where we are today. How does it look for the approval plan? As infrastructure, how long until approval plans seem as ancient as Roman aqueducts in cities where citizens sip their sparkling water from bottles? In another column we’ll look at the approval plan’s prospects in a world where the biggest infrastructure problem might be the kind that isn’t crumbling. 🌱



## Rumors from page 75

in the Asia Pacific. And in late September, Corrie will be at the University of Texas Pan American as Scholarly Communications librarian! Corrie is very excited to be joining a great library staff and

booming university. Corrie says that fortunately her Spanish is better than her Cantonese!

Speaking of languages, I had fun trying to speak Greek with Christine Stamison <cStamison@us.swets.com> in Chicago! Christine knows so much more Greek than I do! I am third generation and she is second generation, at least that’s my excuse.

And, for my last hoorah — how about this bad prediction! “This ‘telephone’ has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us.” — Western Union internal memo, 1876. [http://www.maniacworld.com/bad-predictions/telephone\\_has\\_too\\_many\\_shortcomings.html](http://www.maniacworld.com/bad-predictions/telephone_has_too_many_shortcomings.html)

See y’all in Charleston in November! 🐼